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Interview with Rabbi Eli Baruch Shulman

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BY: Staff.

When you approach a sugya, what are your goals and what steps do you take in order to achieve them?

The first thing that I want to do when I learn a *sugya* is get a handle on the *tsurasa di-shema'atesa*, the structure of the *sugya*. “*Sugya*” in this context may mean the page of Gemara in front of me, or it may have a larger ambit and include related discussions elsewhere in *Shas*. I want to know what the issues facing the Rishonim were when they looked at the *sugya* and how they dealt with those issues, as well as how the various pieces of the *sugya* fit together and how they are interrelated.

Out of this analysis emerge the various issues in *lomdus* and the conceptual underpinnings of the topic, so that eventually we can get a rich account of the whole matter.

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Current Issue

(Where) Have All the Theologians Gone? Some Reflection on the Contemporary State of Orthodox Theology

The various *kushyos* (difficulties) that the *mefarshim* (commentators) point out, or that we discover ourselves, are also helpful. They are like the irregularities in the marble that tell you where to chisel. R. Aharon Kreizer – who was a great man, and who taught here at Yeshiva for many years – used to say that a *kushya* is a “*shpalt*” – a crack – that allows us to peek inside the *sugya*. R. Akiva Eiger’s questions are particularly good in this regard; he has an instinct for the jugular, for the living heartbeat of the *sugya*.

The ultimate goal is to have a clear and deep understanding of how the various Rishonim understood the *sugya*. That is not a small thing. The Avnei Nezer once wanted to know what the greatness of R. Chayyim Brisker was, so he sent his student, the Chelkas Yoav, to Brisk to get to know him. When the Chelkas Yoav returned, he told the Avnei Nezer that R. Chayyim knows how the Rambam learned every *sugya* in *Shas*. The Avnei Nezer responded that if that is the case, then he is greater than the two of them.

The *lomdus* of the *sugya* is also very important, but it should emerge organically out of the internal logic of the *sugya*. You know, R. Aharon Kotler used to say a *shi’ur* that was magisterial in its dissection of the *cheshbon* – the logical and textual structure – of the *sugya* in all its complexity; and for R. Aharon, the *sugya* included every discussion in the Bavli and Yerushalmi that related to the topic. His technical prowess was unbelievable. The *shi’ur* was also rich in *lomdus* and conceptual analysis; R. Aharon was, according to the Chazon Ish, the greatest product of the Lithuanian yeshivah world. But the *shi’ur* was tremendously difficult to follow, even for seasoned students. So some of them proposed that he split each *shi’ur* into two; one would focus on the *cheshbon* of the *sugya*, which not everyone could really handle, and the second one would focus on the *sevara*, the conceptual analysis, which was more accessible. He adamantly refused. The students have to know, he insisted, that *sevara* is not *hefker* (a free-for-all) – a *sevara* has to emerge

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from the rigorous working through of the *cheshbon* of the *sugya*; otherwise, you would be able to say anything, and it would be chaos.

Are all Rishonim created equal? In other words, on a fundamental and educational level, should each Rishon's shittah (position) be studied equally and given equal authority when studying a sugya?

Generally, the rule is that *lu yeda'ativ hayisiv* (if I could understand him, then I would be him) – we are not Rishonim and we are not in the position to evaluate their stature. Nonetheless, it is accepted that there are *gedolei ha-Rishonim* (the greatest of the Rishonim), and there is a certain hierarchy. Someone once said to R. Chayyim Volozhin that the Vilna Gaon was like a Tanna. R. Chayyim, whose esteem for the Gaon was limitless, nevertheless replied that, great as the Gaon was, he was not like a Tanna, nor like an Amora, nor like the Geonim, nor like the Ramban, but maybe he was like the Rashba. (Apparently, he felt that there was a difference between the stature of the Ramban and that of the Rashba.)

Of course, when we are working on a *sugya*, we will begin with the Rishonim who are most on the *daf*, such as Rashi, Tosafos, the Rosh, the Rashba, etc.

So it would be okay to move on to the next sugya if one only learned Rashi, Tosafot, and Rambam, without learning the opinions of the other Rishonim on the sugya?

It is hard enough to work out how Rashi learned the *sugya*, and then it is another whole undertaking to see how Tosafos learned it. If you are going to do that with twenty Rishonim, you will just walk away confused, and you will not get very far either, so you have to limit your scope. This was the unanimous opinion of all the great *rashei yeshivah*, who were great pedagogues. I am not referring to somebody who is doing a specific study or a

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monograph on a *sugya*. R. Elchanan Wasserman used to recommend learning Rashi, Tosafos, the Rosh, and one Rishon, such as the Rashba or the Ran. Nowadays, for better or for worse, the pace of learning in yeshivos has become much slower, so we usually look at more Rishonim than that, but there still has to be a limit, especially for young *bachurim*. You have to be careful not to overload.

What should the role of Acharonim be in one's talmud Torah? Do the answers to the previous two questions depend on whether one is studying Halakhah le-ma'aseh (practical Halakhah) or not?

First of all, it is important to understand that learning Acharonim is different than learning Rishonim. Rishonim wrote very precisely, so every word is freighted with meaning. (Maybe this is related to the fact that the Rishonim wrote before there was printing.) So when you learn a Rishon, you must read it slowly, exhaustively, and must attempt to understand every word and phrase. Acharonim wrote much more discursively, so the challenge of reading an Acharon is to follow the thread of his argument, which might extend over several pages. Very often, our students are used to reading Rishonim and then they read an Acharon and get bogged down because they are not used to the style of the Acharonim.

As to how much Acharonim should occupy us, again, it is a question of time. If somebody is doing a study of a particular *sugya*, then he may want to see what all the major Acharonim say on it. R. Shach used to say that, in general, *mi'utam yafeh*, a little bit is healthy; you *can* have too much of a good thing. One should see enough to know what the discourse of the Acharonim is, but he does not necessarily have to see every Acharon on the *sugya*. This is not to be dismissive of the Acharonim, but Acharonim are complicated and you can easily get lost. In the yeshivos, they particularly valued certain Acharonim,

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such as R. Akiva Eiger, the Ketsos, and the Nesivos, so you do not want to miss those, especially if they have something major to say on the *sugya*. If there is a major Ketsos on the *sugya* and you do not know about it, then there is really a hole in your learning of the topic.

If a person is learning without a shi'ur – on his own or with a *chavrusa* – then I think it is very worthwhile to find one contemporary yeshivah-style work that he feels comfortable with, in order to make sure that he is plugged into the discourse; usually, those kinds of works will cite the major Acharonim that he really should not miss.

Do you feel that there are shortcomings to the standard methodology of the Brisker derekh (Brisker methodology of learning), and, if so, how is it possible for one to overcome those deficiencies?

I would begin by observing that in the YU community, the term “Brisk” is used almost interchangeably with the *yeshivishe derech ha-limmud*. I suppose that is not a cardinal sin, but it is not how the term is used in the rest of the Torah world. The *yeshivishe derech ha-limmud* is the approach to learning that developed in the Lithuanian yeshivos from the founding of Volozhin until the Holocaust and beyond, and while it is hard to overstate R. Chayyim Brisker’s importance in that movement, his *derech* was not the only one. Within that framework, there are many different streams and battei midrash, creating considerable variety, but it is still a recognizably coherent intellectual movement. In a real way, it is also a collaborative movement, perhaps the most collaborative that the world of learning has seen since the days of the great yeshivos of the Ba’alei ha-Tosafos.

The term “Brisk,” on the other hand, is particularly associated with R. Chayyim himself, of course, but more especially with the beis midrash of R.

Chayyim's son, R. Yitzchak Ze'ev, the Brisker Rav. (In YU circles, he is usually referred to as R. Velvel, but outside of those circles nobody calls him that anymore.) Even though the Brisker Rav did not have a yeshivah in Europe, R. Leyzer Yudl used to send the most select *talmidim* from the Mir to learn by him. These were men, such as R. Leyb Malin, R. Yonah Minsker and R. Noach Borenstein, who were already accomplished *talmidei chachamim* and steeped in *yeshivishe* learning, yet they would get from the Brisker Rav a certain something – a certain austerity, an intellectual fastidiousness – that was recognizably the hallmark of Brisk. And, of course, here at YU we associate Brisk particularly with the Rav.

In any event, call it what you will, the *derech ha-limmud* that developed in the Lithuanian yeshivos is tremendously powerful, and its influence has spread to other circles as well. Many Chasidic yeshivos – even before the war – took Lithuanian *rashei yeshivah* because of it. R. Shach was a rosh yeshivah in a Chasidic yeshivah in Europe. The Tshebener Rav, who was the greatest *posek* in the Chasidic world after the war, took products of Lithuanian yeshivos to teach in his yeshivah. Even in Merkaz HaRav, despite R. Kook's opposition to R. Chayyim's approach, they learn in this way.

A word about *derech ha-limmud* in general: If a person has a good, sound *derech ha-limmud*, that by itself will not make him a *lamdan*, any more than knowing the principles of good chess playing – that you should try to control the center, for example – will make you a good chess player. To be a *lamdan*, you need a certain set of skills, some of which are not easy to acquire and some of which are best acquired when you are young and your mind is still plastic. You additionally must have a certain critical mass of knowledge. Returning to the analogy of chess, you also have to develop the knack of seeing the good moves. Perhaps most important is a critical sense: the ability to distinguish between what is plausible and not, what is straight and what is crooked.

Thirty-five years ago, when I went to study in Israel, R. Nachum [Partzovitz]'s shi'urim were considered to be the greatest available; since his passing, his reputation has only grown, especially with the ongoing printing of his shi'urim. A major part of his greatness was his critical sense. You could see his shi'urim emerge from the words of the Rishonim themselves. He had a very highly developed sense of what is a plausible reading of the Rishonim and what is not. He used to say that he does not believe that the Rishonim did not know how to write, so whatever interpretation we offer of their words has to emerge from those words themselves in a natural way.

So *derech ha-limmud* by itself will not make you a *lamdan*. On the other hand, having a bad *derech ha-limmud* will certainly stand in your way. Roger Bacon writes somewhere that genius without method is like being fleet-footed but headed in the wrong direction.

What exactly does derekh ha-limmud consist of if it is not a critical sensibility or a set of skills?

We can talk about *derech ha-limmud* on two levels. On the micro level, how do I actually go about learning the *sugya*? How do I start? What do I do first? What do I do second? One of the things I recommend over and over to my *talmidim* is to go over the *shakla ve-tarya* (give-and-take) of the Gemara, Rashi, and Tosafos by heart – not by rote, but simultaneously with in-depth learning. It focuses one's attention on the *sugya* itself and its structure.

On a macro level, what are my goals when I am learning this *sugya*? What am I working toward? What are the set of intellectual tools that I have in my toolbox, and how do I apply them? What do I consider an important issue, and what do I consider secondary? What kinds of questions are admissible, and what kinds of answers are satisfactory? How do I organize the *sugya* in my

mind? And so on. So *derech ha-limmud* is the overarching framework, but not a substitute for particular skills or for knowledge.

You mentioned that the Brisker derekh is a phrase that is overused. Would you say that R. Hayyim Soloveitchik and his sons, acknowledged for initiating the Brisker derekh, did indeed establish a revolution in Torah learning?

R. Chayyim changed everything, and he changed nothing. R. Chayyim changed everything in that, through his *talmidim* and his general influence, he had a very strong impact in shifting the focus of learning in the yeshivos away from the kinds of purely textual concerns that had become the preoccupation of learning at that time towards the conceptual underpinnings of the topic. Not that textual concerns were abandoned, but there was a shift in balance. But at the same time, R. Chayyim changed nothing because conceptual analysis existed before him as well – we have it in the Rishonim and in the great Acharonim such as R. Akiva Eiger, the Ketsos, and the Nesivos. The whole of *yeshivishe lomdus* can be found in the Ramban.

Yet there is something unique and revolutionary about R. Chayyim which was widely recognized, but which is hard to pin down. In his own oeuvre, he brought conceptualization to a very high pitch. And he conveyed a new sense that *sevara* has to be rigorous in its own right and that it is not just a handmaiden of *cheshbon*. R. Baruch Ber was once asked why one needs a rebbe; after all, one can open up a volume of R. Akiva Eiger's writings and read the most profound Torah thoughts. R. Baruch Ber answered that R. Akiva Eiger can teach you what to say, but you need a rebbe to teach you what *not* to say. I think it could be argued that a large part of R. Chayyim's contribution lay in teaching us what not to say.

Of course, R. Chayyim himself was a titan. The Meytsheter Illui [R. Shlomo Polachek] said of him that he was simply incapable of saying anything shallow; everything he said reached down into the very depths of the *sugya*. R. Chayyim Ozer, himself a giant beyond our ability to measure, used to quip – taking the famous taxonomy of *domem*, *tsoameach*, *chai*, and *medabber* (mineral, vegetable, animal, and human) one step further – that there are really five categories of being: *domem*, *tsoameach*, *chai*, *medabber*, and R. Chayyim Brisker.

One last point: R. Chayyim's revolution cannot be separated from the yeshivah movement as a whole, which brought together the finest young minds from all over Eastern Europe to a self-contained archipelago of a few large yeshivos and created an intellectual ferment that did not exist when you only had little battei midrash in every town.

Is there a specific methodology that should be used in the study of Tanakh?

One thing I know is that Tanach has to be studied with *yir'as Shamayim* (fear of Heaven). R. Yaakov Kamenetsky once said that after he passes away, he wants to be buried next to R. Chayyim Heller (who was a great academic scholar of Bible, as well as a *gadol* in traditional learning), because of an episode in which he was deeply impressed by R. Heller's *yir'as Shamayim*. They were once conversing about a certain verse in Tanach, and R. Yaakov mentioned that there are those who would like to emend the text of that verse. R. Chayyim turned white and almost fainted.

Would you say that a bahur yeshivah should spend some time learning Tanakh while he is in his yeshivah years?

Yes, absolutely. A *talmid chacham* should know Tanach and have the twenty-

four *kishutim* (adornments), which, as the Midrash puts it, are the twenty-four *sefarim* of Tanach.^[i]

What is the role of yir'at Shamayim in Talmud or in Tanakh study and in pesak?

First of all, “*Reshis chochmah yir'as Hashem*” (Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom).^[ii] The gateway to Torah is *yir'as Shamayim*. The Avnei Nezer was once told a Torah idea in the name of the Oneg Yom Tov, whom he did not know personally, and he said that from the lucidity of the idea, he could tell what a great *tsaddik* the Oneg Yom Tov must be.

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (22b) says that *yir'as Shamayim* includes reverence for *talmidei chachamim*. The Vilna Gaon used to say that if a person learns with showy casuistry then he grows arrogant, because he convinces himself that he has solved all the problems that the commentators raise. But if he learns properly, then he constantly sees how the questions which confound him are already addressed by the Rishonim with a few spare words, and he grows humble.

Not only is *yir'as Shamayim* a prerequisite for Torah study; it is also the result of such study. It is a virtuous cycle. R. Yisrael Salanter used to say that if someone does not toil over the *ve-im tomar* (question) of Tosafos and over the *ve-yesh lomar* (answer), then from where will he draw *yir'as Shamayim*?

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^[i] This metaphor can be found in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:11.

[\[i\]](#) *Tehillim* 111:10.



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